



NATHAN SLATE JOSEPH

Pure Pigment, Constructed Form

BY MICHAËL AMY

Pigment has played an important, if often overlooked, role in the history of sculpture. Ancient sculptures were once brightly colored, but weathering soon eroded almost all of their painted surfaces. Many medieval sculptures were stripped of paint in the 19th and 20th centuries, when most critics considered polychromy in sculpture to be unacceptable. This negative view was largely determined by the apparent material purity of surviving classical sculptures and by the white marbles carved since the Middle Ages by sculptors who were strongly influenced by those antique remains. Nevertheless, the academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme tinted one of his marble statues (*Tanagra*, 1890)—for he recognized that this was in full accord with ancient Greek practice and added a life-like quality to his figure—and Picasso painted bronzes (*Glass of Absinth*, 1914) in order to mask the precious metal and its venerable artistic history, thereby attacking the material's supposed integrity and offending the bourgeoisie. There are, of course, other ways of introducing polychromy into sculpture, namely by including materials of different colors into the same work, like Phidias in his (long lost) colossal Athena of ivory and gold and Bernini in his *Tomb of Urban VIII*, a composite work of bronze and white and dark marble. But the use of color applied in the form of pigments to the materials of sculpture is particularly pertinent to a discussion of the recent work of Nathan Slate Joseph.

Top and bottom: *Peregrine Falcon*, 2007. Pure pigment and galvanized steel, 110 x 56 x 56 in.

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Joseph only recently began making sculpture. Significantly, he uses the same materials to produce these abstract wall- and floor-bound works as he employs in his abstract paintings. More than 30 years ago, he proceeded to mix pigment with acid and water and applied this medium onto a metal support. A chemical reaction occurred as the metal oxidized, locking the pigment into place while preserving its freshness of hue. Ever since that moment in 1975, Joseph has been applying pure mineral pigment mixed with water onto large sheets of galvanized steel, which are treated with acid, placed outdoors for a period of weeks, sprinkled with more pigment, and hosed daily with water before being cut up and soldered together to create his signature geometric paintings. The process remains the same in the recent sculptures, up to the stage of cutting and piecing the sheets together. The rectangular panels or shards used in the paintings make way for a greater variety of shapes, ranging from thin bars to triangles and polygons, which occasionally are bent and then soldered together. The paintings were always rectangular or square in format and had no more salience than was achieved by placing one flat sheet partly on top of another. In Joseph's sculpture, we feel him taking great pleasure in the seemingly endless range of possibilities that open themselves to him.

Among other forms, Joseph explores a curved volume resembling the hull of a boat, a convex leaf, or a scarab's shell, hanging it against the wall, with its rounded side projecting into the viewer's space. *Traveling Moses* (2006) consists of more than 20 pieces of various sizes and shapes soldered together to form a bud, swollen with the promise of new life. Placed vertically against the wall like a relief, it is asymmetrical both in interior organization and in contour: the large irregular triangle at the center points toward the left, and the left side of the configuration seemingly bursts at the seams. The germ of such constructed sculpture built up of planes lies in Picasso's (unpainted) sheet metal *Guitar* (1912–13). The idiosyncratic way in which Joseph colors the metal plates makes his sculpture stand out. *Traveling Moses* would look very different if it had been painted with oil or enamel colors. Instead, velvety, powdery, flowing marbled effects are obtained as

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Top: *Untitled—Rusty Lines*, 2007. Pure pigment and galvanized steel, 45 x 18 x 13 in. Bottom: *Untitled*, 2006. Pigment and galvanized steel, 42 x 16.5 x 16.5 in.

foamy whites wash over areas of pale and dark green, occasionally making way for undertones of rusty brown. The bulging volume is crisscrossed by thin brown diagonals and one long vertical—the edges of the plates soldered to a thin armature of rods. The dynamic line-work thereby achieved is reminiscent of cracked glass or ice.

Joseph has made an entire series of works akin in structure to *Traveling Moses*. *Night Rush* (2006) includes orange, yellow, and green panels (colors are never mixed on the same plate of metal), and large brown rust stains run along its central axis. Slimmer than *Traveling Moses*, this form dances like a flame. One small triangle is left open on either side of the configuration. In the leaf-shaped *Untitled—Rusty Lines* (2006), metal sheets have made way for expansive openings, the solid elements reduced to brown bars that echo the edges of imaginary plates. With its multiplied and haphazardly scattered lines, this composition seems made of sticks and recalls the work of Andy Goldsworthy and Deborah Butterfield.

The freestanding *Peregrine Falcon* (2007) marks the beginning of a new chapter for Joseph. It consists of seemingly nothing more than two curving vertical sheets of metal. Both are colored golden yellow on the outside, and the smaller one has bright green metal plates soldered onto its interior. These forms swell like sails around the pole holding them in place. The mellifluous rhythms of Isadora Duncan are brought to mind when the work is seen from one angle, and a large pod appears when it is seen from another vantage point. Although *Peregrine Falcon* does not read as effectively from all sides, the degree to which it changes is undoubtedly striking: as we walk around the work, it becomes monochrome, then bi-chrome, before enclosing a wallop of negative space. In such recent work, Joseph arranges lines and sheets of saturated color in three-dimensional space, to striking decorative effect.

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